

I am not sorry, they had it coming. I would have loved for things to turn out differently, but anger blinds you, and sometimes you resort to something wicked.

I was eleven when my father died, he was a carpenter and spent long hours at his workshop crafting wood into different forms for his customers. My mother stayed home and catered to the needs of I and my three siblings, I was the oldest. We were poor and barely got by, but we were happy. Our parents kept us fed and clothed.

So when Joseph, my father's apprentice ran to the house that day, panic in his eyes, almost breathless, I knew things were going to change. My mother was bent over the fire outside cooking dinner while my siblings played with children in the area.

I couldn't make out what Joseph was saying as I watched through the window, I saw a pained expression come over my mother's face and she screamed. We lived in a compound with six other families, and those of them who were home at the time ran outside to investigate the cause of the scream.

I stood glued to the window as my mother fell to the ground thrashing around and screaming hysterically. I knew something bad had happened, and it likely involved my father.

Two of the neighbors pulled her from the ground as she screamed, "what am I going to do now? Papa Janet has left me alone with these children."

My stomach sank.

My father's funeral came and went, and we had to adjust to a new reality that did not include him.

Many people had come from different places to attend his funeral, he wasn't a rich man, but he knew many people and many of them quietly squeezed money into my mother's palm after saying their condolences.

I tried to keep my siblings engaged, so they wouldn't bother my grieving mother, they were five, eight, and ten. It hadn't sunk in properly that life as they knew it had changed.

My mother struggled to cater for us, the little money she had gotten from the funeral dried up and her meagre earnings from selling tomatoes in the market was barely enough. Every night I listened as she desperately begged my uncles on the phone for money, they turned her down.

I came back from school to find a tall man sitting in my father's favorite chair, a cold bottle of Pepsi was set in front of him, it was untouched. My mother sat across him.

"Mommy good afternoon," I greeted. "Good afternoon sir" he nodded and smiled.

"Ehen Janet," my mother replied indifferently, and her eyes said go to your room I'll send for you.

After the man left, she sent for me and asked me to sit beside her, I was nervous and hoped she wasn't going to say anything I would rather not hear.

"Janet, Ene" my heart skipped a beat. My mother only called me Ene when she was trying to butter me up for something.

"That man you saw yesterday, he's your father's cousin, and he wants to take you to Kaduna where he lives, so you can get a better life and a good education"

"Everything I need is here with you mummy" I protested. "Please don't send me away".

"Ene it will just be for a little while, when I find something better I will send for you, please do it for Oche, Benji and Ochanya. I wish we could all stay together, but it won't be easy taking care of all of you" .

She chokes back tears and that's all that is needed to convince me. Seeing my mother cry unnerved me, she was always so put together and to watch her break down in front of me made me uncomfortable. I would go with my father's cousin, it was only for a little while.

My siblings stood beside the car when it was time for me to go. They all had long faces, I reassured them that it was temporary, and I would be back before they knew it. I also promised to buy them many gifts, that cheered them up and when I got into the car they waved until it was out of sight. I was leaving Sabon Gari, my family and the only life I had known for a new place, and it scared me.

My father's cousin barely said anything to me except to ask if I was hungry, at which point he'd buy me snacks from hawkers. He introduced himself as Uncle Maurice and said my father was an older brother who took care of him and protected him when they were kids, so he would do the same for me. I settled into the seat and drifted to sleep as I thought about my new life and what it would possibly be like. I would have to adjust to living with a new family -Uncle Maurice said he had two children and his wife was very nice-, make new friends and try to fit in at school until my mother came for me.

Uncle Maurice gently tapped me on the shoulder, I opened my eyes and rubbed them a little, it was dark. We were outside a large gate in a neighborhood with similar exteriors.

"We are here", he said gently before honking. The gate opened after a few seconds, and he drove in, it was a compound with three flats in a pleasant neighborhood, nothing like the place I was coming from. No one was outside except for the gate man who also doubled as the security guard, and the house was quiet . It was only lit up by the halogen lamps adorning the house.

The door to the third flat opened and two cute boys aged around four to six ran out and jumped into Uncle Maurice's arms.

“Daddy, daddy” they squealed. The lights in the other flats were on, and I could see a few faces peeking through the windows.

“My boys”, Uncle Maurice spun them around for a second and put them down. I awkwardly stared as they paid me no mind, excited to see their father.

“Mummy’s cooking, we’ve been waiting for you, so we can eat dinner” the older one said.

“I hope you’re not too hungry then” Uncle Maurice returned. “Go inside the house, let me help your cousin take her things in” they ran off. They had not paid attention to me and I hoped we would get along since I would be living with them for a little while.

I had not packed many things because I didn’t have a lot of things, my mother had packed bread and eggs and asked me to give them to Uncle Maurice and his wife.

He took out my luggage from the boot of his car and walked ahead of me to the flat while I dragged my luggage.

The door opened to reveal a tastefully furnished house. It was clean and smelled of fruit and food, a heady smell that made my mouth water.

There was a family portrait on the wall, in it Uncle Maurice and his wife are sitting with their children on their lap. They were a beautiful family.

As I stared at the portrait on the wall, his wife came out of the kitchen, she was even more beautiful in person. She greeted Uncle Maurice, who walked past her to the bedroom, and then she turned to me.

“Janet welcome how was your trip” “Good evening ma, it was fine ma”. I kept my gaze down, I felt self-conscious in my clothes that were a little faded.

“Let me show you to your new room, you’ll be staying with the boys”, I dragged my luggage and followed her to a room painted blue with action figures on the wall.

“You must be tired, take a bath then come out and have dinner”

“Okay ma, my mother said I should give you this, ” I said handing her the bag with the bread and eggs.

That’s so nice of her, “she took it from me and looked inside to see what was in the bag. “Hurry and come out for dinner “, She closed the door.

Dinner was vegetable soup and pounded yam, with little chunks of pomo and beef. The food was so delicious and when I was offered a second helping, I accepted with pleasure.

After dinner, Uncle Maurice called me to the sitting area. He tells me I will start school and asks what class I am in, I tell him I am in Jss2.

When I go into my new room that I share with Jackson and Leo, their sons, they're already sound asleep. Jackson, the younger one, is clutching tightly to his teddy bear and snoring, while Leo has taken up space on the bed and is thrashing around.

I make some space at the edge and get into bed. This was my new life, and it seemed to be starting well.

I'm awoken roughly by Auntie Linda, it's still quite dark, Jackson and Leo are sleeping. I had spent most of the night shoving Leo's foot off my face and anywhere else he chose to put it.

"Wake up," she said harshly with a scowl on her face. "You need to prepare the boys for school," I helped my mother with preparing my siblings for school, but I was never awoken this early. I slowly get out of bed as she screams at me to move faster, I am confused by the attitude change. I prepare bathing water for the boys and iron their school uniforms.

She went in to wake the boys while I swept the entire house and mopped it. She came to the dining area to inspect the cleaning and asked me to clean again.

"Is this how you clean things in that village you're from? Do it again", she barked.

I'm not from the village, we lived in a poor neighborhood, but it wasn't a village. I don't understand why Auntie Linda is talking to me like that. I comply anyway.

I finish cleaning at six o'clock, and I go into the bathroom to take my bath. The lights are out and there is no hot water left for me to take my bath. I go out to tell Auntie Linda.

"What do you want me to do? You'll just have to use cold water".

It is November and harmattan is setting in slowly, I shudder at the thought of using cold water, but I am left with no choice. While Jackson and Leo watch cartoons as they wait for their mother to finish preparing their breakfast of noodles and fried eggs, I count to three before I pour the ice-cold water on my body. By the time I'm done I have goosebumps all over and I'm shivering like a featherless chicken.

I put on my clothes and go to the dining area, Jackson and Leo are eating noodles, I am served Pap.

The pap wasn't made properly, and some parts are chunky, I knew I couldn't complain, and so I ate everything. When I go to wash the cup in the sink, I see the bread my mother bought in the dust bin, my heart sinks.

Uncle Maurice is awake, and he comes to the dining area.

We take turns greeting him, and he hands me a schoolbag. It is a little threadbare.

"Thank you," I say, noticing that it also has a few stains on it.

We get into the car and Uncle Maurice drops the boys off at school first. Their school is private

and many of the kids are dropped off by their parents. When he's sure that the boys are off to class, he drives me quietly to my new school.

The building is dilapidated, and some windows are hanging off the hinges. Many students are playing around and chattering. I clutch my bag tightly, and feel a strong need to go home back to my mother.

We go into the principal's house and while Uncle Maurice speaks to her, I am given a school uniform and socks. I miss my old school, all my friends are there, and it's nothing like this school I've been enrolled into. My father believed in acquiring us a good education, and he would be turning in his grave if he knew I was being sent to a school that looked like this.

Uncle Maurice leaves and promises to pick me up after school. He is an hour late and my stomach is rumbling because I wasn't given any snacks and had to watch as the other students bought and ate their lunches while I sat alone in a corner.

When we get home, the boys are taking a nap and Aunt Linda is watching something on TV. She replies indifferently when I greet her. Lunch is a small portion of jollof rice, I'm still hungry after I finish eating, but I don't ask for more. Intuitively, I know that I would be inviting trouble if I did.

And so my new life begins, I quickly learn that I have not been taken in out of the goodness of my Uncle and Aunt's hearts. I am expected to clean, wash and do everything around the house.

The first time Aunt Linda hit me it was because I served Uncle Maurice food on a plate reserved for guests, something I had not been made aware of before. He watched as she landed blows on my back and didn't step in to say anything. The beatings became more frequent and anything, no matter how little, would set her off.

Sometimes the neighbors intervened, so she took to locking the door and ignoring them as they banged on it and pleaded for her to stop. I grew accustomed to their looks of pity when they saw me outside going on errands for my Aunt. Uncle Maurice didn't hit me, but he didn't stop her either, he rarely said anything to me. Their home was my personal hell and as the days turned into weeks and then a year, my resentment grew. I tried to find ways to call my mother and beg her to take me away, but I had no phone, and they made sure I didn't have access to one. It also didn't help that I didn't have her number memorized.

I loved Leo and Jackson, they were like my little brothers and made living in that house bearable.

The day I went over the edge was also the day my first period came. I was scared and couldn't understand why I was bleeding down there, no one had had the talk with me. I couldn't tell Aunt Linda and just stayed in the bathroom washing myself over and over hoping the water would make it stop. Aunt Linda started to scream my name. I told her I was in the bathroom and would be out soon. To avoid more problems, I put my panties on and went to meet her in the living room, I could feel the wetness soaking up my underwear, and it started to drip.

The panicked look on my face drew her attention to the blood that was now in a tiny puddle on

the rug. A blinding slap rocked my face and I fell backwards. She beat me to a pulp for ruining her rug. Then she asked me to use a rag, so I didn't stain any more of her possessions.

While I wept in the bathroom, she gave me instructions on what to cook for dinner and went out for ice cream with her kids. One of the neighbors knocked on the door, she was holding a pack of pads. She had heard the scuffle and brought me some, she also gave me a little lecture on what to do and what this new phase meant, then she left.

I stood in the mirror and looked at all the wounds I had gotten since I moved to my uncle's house, I had to make the suffering stop.

Dinner that day was Yam porridge with a few drops of bleach.